Rankin/Bass Animated Entertainment

Rankin/Bass Animated Entertainment (founded and formerly known as **Videocraft International, Ltd.** and **Rankin/Bass Productions, Inc.**) was an American production company located in New York, New York, and known for its seasonal television specials, usually done in stop motion animation. Rankin/Bass' stop-motion productions are recognizable by their visual style of doll-like characters with spheroid body parts and ubiquitous powdery snow using an animation technique called "Animagic". Often, traditional cel animation scenes of falling snow would be projected over the action to create the effect of a snowfall.

Nearly all of the studio's animation was outsourced to Japanese animation companies such as MOM Production, Mushi Productions and Topcraft.[1][2] Rankin/Bass was one of the first western studios to outsource their low-budget animated television and film productions to animation studios in foreign countries; the others that already practiced animation outsourcing includes Total Television and King Features Syndicate TV in New York, New York; and Jay Ward Productions and Hanna-Barbera Productions in Los Angeles, California.

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History

Rankin/Bass Animated Entertainment

Formerly	Videocraft International (1960–1968)
Industry	Film
Predecessor	Arthur Rankin Jr. Associates
Founded	September 14, 1960
Founders	Arthur Rankin, Jr. Jules Bass
Defunct	1987 (main studio) 2001 (partnership)
Fate	***1987***: Turned into Lorimar-Telepictures ***2001***: The Partnership was dissolved.
Headquarters	New York City, New York, United States
Products	Television specials Television series Feature films
Parent	Independent (1960–1971, 1974–1983) Tomorrow Entertainment (1971–1974) Telepictures

Corporation (1983–1987)

The company was founded in New York City by Arthur Rankin, Jr. and Jules Bass on September 14, 1960, as **Videocraft International, Ltd.**. The majority of Rankin/Bass' work, including all of their "Animagic" stop-motion productions (which they were well known for), were created in Tokyo, Japan. Throughout the 1960s, the Animagic productions were headed by Japanese stop-motion animator Tadahito Mochinaga at his studio, MOM Production. He was credited for his supervision as "Tad Mochinaga".

Rankin/Bass' traditionally animated works were done by several animation studios such as Toei Animation, Eiken (formerly known as **TCJ**, short for **Television Corporation of Japan**), Mushi Production, and especially Topcraft, which was formed in 1971 by Toei animator, Toru Hara (who was credited as an animation supervisor in some of Rankin/Bass' specials). While several of Topcraft's staff, including Hara and industry legends such as Hayao Miyazaki, would go on to form Studio Ghibli in the wake of Topcraft's death, others formed another studio: Pacific Animation Corporation, which continued working on Rankin/Bass' titles until they shut down.

In addition to the "name" talent that provided the narration for the specials, Rankin/Bass had its own company of voice actors. For the studio's early work, this group was based in Toronto, Ontario where recording was supervised by veteran CBC announcer Bernard Cowan. This group included actors such as Paul Soles, Larry D. Mann, and Paul Kligman.

Maury Laws served as musical director for almost all of the animated films and television programs. Romeo Muller was another consistent contributor, serving as screenwriter for many of Rankin/Bass' best-known productions including *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *The Little Drummer Boy*, and *Frosty the Snowman*.

Output

One of Videocraft's first projects was an independently produced television series, *The New Adventures of Pinocchio* in 1960, based on the Italian author Carlo Collodi's novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio* and featuring "Animagic", a stop motion animation process using figurines or puppets (a process already pioneered by George Pal's "Puppetoons" and Art Clokey's *Gumby* and *Davey and Goliath*), managed by Mochinaga and his MOM Production staffers for Videocraft with Dentsu. This was followed by another independently produced series using more traditional cel animation and based on already established characters, *Tales of the Wizard of Oz* in 1961. Unlike many of Rankin/Bass work, *Tales of the Wizard of Oz* was animated by Crawley Films in Ottawa, headed by F. R. Crawley.

Rudolph era

One of the mainstays of the business was holiday-themed animated specials for airing on American television. In 1964, the company produced a special for NBC and sponsor General Electric, later owner of NBC. It was a stop motion animated adaptation of Robert L. May's 1939 story "Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer" and the 1949 song it inspired, "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," written by May's brother-in-law, Johnny Marks. In 1948, it had been made into a cartoon by Max Fleischer, brother and former partner of Dave Fleischer, as a traditional animated short for the Jam Handy Film Company almost two decades earlier. This featured the Canadian actress Billie Mae Richards as the voice of the main title character, Rudolph.

With the American actor Burl Ives in the role of Sam the Snowman — the narrator, and an original orchestral score composed by Marks himself, *Rudolph* became one of the most popular, and longest-running, Christmas specials in television history: it remained with NBC until around 1972 when it moved

to CBS. In 2019, for its 55th anniversary, the special was also aired on Freeform as part of its "25 Days of Christmas" franchise, although it will continue to air on CBS under a separate license with Universal.[3]

The special contained seven original songs. In 1965, a new song was filmed in "Animagic" to replace "We're a Couple of Misfits", titled "Fame and Fortune."

The success of *Rudolph* led to numerous other Christmas specials. The first was *The Cricket on the Hearth*, with a live-action prologue by Danny Thomas, the continuity and character designs by Don Duga and Paul Coker, Jr., and the animation by Jiro Yanase's TCJ, in 1967, followed by the Thanksgiving special *The Mouse on the Mayflower*, told by Tennessee Ernie Ford and animated by Kenzo Masaoka, Sanae Yamamoto, and Yasuji Murata's Toei Animation, in 1968.

Other holiday specials

Many of their other specials, like *Rudolph*, were based on popular Christmas songs. In 1968, the British-American actress Greer Garson provided dramatic narration for *The Little Drummer Boy*, based on the traditional song and set during the birth of the baby Jesus Christ, and starring the Puerto Rican actor José Ferrer as the voice of Ben Haramend. During that year, Videocraft International, Ltd. (whose logo dominated the Rankin/Bass logo in the closing credit sequences) changed its name to Rankin/Bass Productions, Inc., and adopted a new logo, retaining a Videocraft byline in their closing credits until 1971 when Tomorrow Entertainment, a unit of General Electric acquired the production company. The "Animagic" process for *The Little Drummer Boy* took place at MOM Production, which was renamed Video Tokyo Production after Tadahito Mochinaga left Japan for his return trip to China following the completion of the animation for *Mad Monster Party?*, thus ending his collaboration with Rankin/Bass. Takeo Nakamura, the director of Sanrio's 1979 stop motion feature *Nutcracker Fantasy*,[4][5] was among the "Animagic" team but was never credited as a supervisor.

The following year, in 1969, Jimmy Durante sang and told the story of *Frosty the Snowman*, with Jackie Vernon voicing Frosty[6] and Osamu Tezuka's Mushi Production handling the animation with supervision by Yusaku "Steve" Nakagawa, a layout artist and character designer from Hanna-Barbera Productions in Los Angeles, California. It was based on Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins' 1950 song of the same name.

1970 brought another Christmas special, *Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town*.[7] Rankin/Bass enlisted Fred Astaire as narrator S.D. (Special Delivery) Kluger, a mailman answering children's questions about Santa Claus and telling his origin story. The story involved young Kris Kringle, voiced by Mickey Rooney, and the villainous Burgermeister Meisterburger, voiced by Paul Frees. Kringle later marries the town's schoolteacher, Miss Jessica, voiced by Robie Lester. Kizo Nagashima, the associate director of Rankin/Bass' previous productions, was credited as a production supervisor.

In 1971, Rankin/Bass produced their first Easter television special, *Here Comes Peter Cottontail*, with the voices of Danny Kaye as the narrator Seymour S. Sassafrass, Vincent Price as the evil rabbit January Q. Irontail, and Casey Kasem from the *Scooby-Doo* franchise as the title character Peter Cottontail. It was not based upon the title song by Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins, but on a 1957 novel by Priscilla and Otto Friedrich titled *The Easter Bunny That Overslept*. This was the final "Animagic" production to be supervised by Kizo Nagashima. In 1977, Fred Astaire returned as S.D. Kluger in *The Easter Bunny Is Comin' to Town*, telling the tale of the Easter Bunny's origins. From there, Rankin/Bass uses Masaki Iizuka as an associate producer, and Akikazu Kono as an "Animagic" supervisor. Back in 1973, Iizuka was the production assistant of *Marco* — a live-action musical film based on the biography of Italian merchant, explorer, and writer Marco Polo, filmed at Toho Company in Tokyo and on location throughout East Asia, and featuring Kono's "Animagic" sequence of the Tree People. Previously, he was met by Rankin during the animation production of the Halloween television special *Mad, Mad, Mad Monsters* at Mushi Production in 1972, and became an integral part of Rankin/Bass for many years.

In 1974, Rankin/Bass Productions was relaunched once again as an independent production company and produced another Christmas special for television, *The Year Without a Santa Claus*, featuring Shirley Booth, voicing narrator Mrs. Claus, Mickey Rooney, returning as the voice of Santa Claus, and supporting characters Snow Miser (voiced by Dick Shawn) and Heat Miser (voiced by George S. Irving). It was the first Rankin/Bass "Animagic" production on which Akikazu Kono and puppet maker Ichiro Komuro share in the production supervision. It was remade as a poorly received live-action/special effects TV movie shown on NBC in 2006 starring Delta Burke and John Goodman as Mrs. Claus and Santa.[8]

Throughout the 1970s, Rankin/Bass, with Video Tokyo and the former Toei Animation employee Toru Hara's Topcraft, continued to produce animated sequels to its classic specials, including the teaming of Rudolph and Frosty in *Rudolph and Frosty's Christmas in July*, with the voice of Ethel Merman as Lilly Loraine, the ringmistress of a seaside circus, and Rooney again returning as Santa. The special features cameos by characters from several other Rankin/Bass holiday specials, including Big Ben from *Rudolph's Shiny New Year* and Jack Frost from *Frosty's Winter Wonderland*. Later that year, Jack appeared in his own special, *Jack Frost*. Narrated by Buddy Hackett, it tells the story of the winter sprite's love for a mortal woman menaced by the evil Cossack king, Kubla Kraus (Paul Frees, in addition to Kubla, voiced Jack Frost's overlord, Father Winter). In this special, Jack's voice was performed by Robert Morse, who previously voiced Stuffy in 1976's *The First Easter Rabbit* (loosely based on Margery Williams' *The Velveteen Rabbit*), and young Ebenezer Scrooge in 1978's *The Stingiest Man in Town* (based on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*).

Among Rankin/Bass' original specials was 1975's *The First Christmas: The Story of the First Christmas Snow*, featuring the voice of Angela Lansbury (who also starred in the 1982 adaptation of *The Last Unicorn*) as the narrating and singing nun, Sister Theresa, and Irving Berlin's Christmas classic "White Christmas".

Their final stop-motion style Christmas story was *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus*, taken from the L. Frank Baum story of the same name and released in 1985. In this story, the Great Ak summons a council of the Immortals to bestow upon a dying Claus the Mantle of Immortality. To make his case, the Great Ak tells Claus's life story, from his discovery as a foundling in the magical forest and his raising by Immortals, through his education by the Great Ak in the harsh realities of the human world, and his acceptance of his destiny to struggle to bring joy to children.[9] This special has recently been released as part of the Warner Brothers Archive Collection on a double-feature disc that also contains *Nestor the Long-Eared Christmas Donkey* which is often paired with *The First Christmas* on holiday broadcasts.

Many of these specials are still shown seasonally on American television, and some have been released on VHS, Betamax, LaserDisc, DVD, Blu-ray, and Digital.

Non-holiday output

Throughout the 1960s, Videocraft produced other stop motion and traditional animation specials and films, some of which were non-holiday stories. 1965 saw the production of Rankin/Bass' first theatrical film, *Willy McBean and His Magic Machine*, another joint venture between Videocraft and Dentsu. 1966 brought *The Daydreamer*, the first of three films to be produced in association with executive producer Joseph E. Levine's Embassy Pictures in Los Angeles, California, and the film adaptation of the stories and characters by the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, which combines live-action, special effects and "Animagic"; and *The Ballad of Smokey the Bear*, narrated by James Cagney, the story of the famous forest fire-fighting bear seen in numerous public service announcements.[10]

The theatrical feature film *Mad Monster Party?* saw theatrical release in the spring of 1967, featuring one of the last performances by the British actor Boris Karloff. The film features affectionate send-ups of classic movie monsters and their locales, adding "Beatle"-wigged skeletons as a send-up of the era's pop bands,

and a writing staff borrowed from *Mad* magazine. It is also the last "Animagic" project that Tadahito Mochinaga supervised.

In 1972 and 1973, Rankin/Bass produced four animated TV movies for *The ABC Saturday Superstar Movie* series: *Mad Mad Mad Monsters*, *Willie Mays and the Say-Hey Kid*, *The Red Baron*, and *That Girl in Wonderland*.

In 1977, Rankin/Bass produced an animated version of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. It was followed in 1980 by an animated version of *The Return of the King* (the animation rights to the first two volumes were held by Saul Zaentz, producer of Ralph Bakshi's animated adaptation *The Lord of the Rings*). Other books adapted include *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle, a rare theatrical release that was co-produced with ITC Entertainment in London, England, Peter Dickinson's *The Flight of Dragons* and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* which was animated by James Wang's Cuckoo's Nest Studios (now Wang Film Productions) in Taipei, Taiwan.

In addition to their prime time specials, Rankin/Bass produced several regular television shows in traditional animation, including *The King Kong Show* in 1966, co-produced with Toei Animation, *The Tomfoolery Show* and *The Jackson 5ive* in 1971 (the latter co-produced with Motown Productions), and *Kid Power* and *The Osmonds* in 1972. The most successful of these was *ThunderCats* in 1985, an action-adventure series based on a related line of toys. It was followed by two similar TV shows about humanoid animals, *SilverHawks* in 1986, and *TigerSharks*, as part of the series *The Comic Strip* in 1987. Each of those four series was mainly animated by former Topcraft employees' Pacific Animation Corporation, with production management by Masaki Iizuka, just before the studio was bought by Disney and renamed Walt Disney Animation Japan in 1988. Neither one enjoyed the same commercial success as *ThunderCats* did, however.

Rankin/Bass also attempted live-action productions, such as 1967's *King Kong Escapes*, a co-production with Toho; 1976's *The Last Dinosaur*; 1978's *The Bermuda Depths*; 1980's *The Ivory Ape* (all co-produced with Tsuburaya Productions, the creators of the *Ultra Series*); and 1983's *The Sins of Dorian Gray*. With the exception of *King Kong Escapes*, all were made-for-television films.

Demise

After its last series output, Rankin/Bass shut down its production company on March 4, 1987.

Arthur Rankin, Jr. would split his time between New York City, where the company still has its offices, and his home in Bermuda. Rankin died at Harrington Sound, Bermuda on January 30, 2014 at the age of 89.[11] Bass became a vegetarian; a decade later, he wrote *Herb, the Vegetarian Dragon*,[12] the first children's book character developed specifically to explore moral issues related to vegetarianism. The original story and a follow-up cookbook became bestsellers for independent publishing house Barefoot Books.

In 1999, Rankin/Bass joined forces with James G. Robinson's Morgan Creek Productions and Nest Family Entertainment (creators of *The Swan Princess* franchise) for the first and only animated adaptation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical *The King and I*, based on a treatment by Rankin. Distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures with its Warner Bros. Family Entertainment division, the film flopped at the American box office and many American film critics took it to task for its depictions of "offensive ethnic stereotyping."

In 2001, Fox aired the first new original Christmas special to be produced by both Rankin and Bass in 16 years, *Santa, Baby!*, which like most of their production company's other specials was based on a popular, similarly-titled Christmas song. *Santa, Baby!* stood out from its predecessors due to its use of African-American characters and voice performers, such as Patti LaBelle (the narrator), Eartha Kitt, Gregory Hines,

Vanessa L. Williams and Tom Joyner.[13] Although Pacific Animation Corporation was responsible for the overseas animation production of the special with the background art provided by Atelier BWCA and the See Throu Studio, some of the animation was done at Steven Hahn's Hanho Heung-Up in Seoul, South Korea. *Santa, Baby!* turned out to be the final Rankin/Bass-produced special; the Rankin/Bass partnership was officially dissolved shortly after, with most of its remaining assets acquired by Warner Bros. Entertainment.

Currently, the pre-1974 Rankin-Bass library (including works from Videocraft International) is owned by NBCUniversal via DreamWorks Animation's DreamWorks Classics subsidiary, while Warner Bros. owns the rights to the post-1973 library via Telepictures. NBCUniversal also retained the rights to *King Kong Escapes* and also currently holds the rights to *Willy McBean and his Magic Machine*, again, via DreamWorks Classics. StudioCanal holds the rights to the films from Rankin-Bass that Embassy Pictures distributed, while ITV Studios currently holds the rights to *The Last Unicorn*. The rights to the 1999 animated film adaptation of *The King and I* are currently held by Morgan Creek Entertainment.

Legacy

For over 20 years, most of Rankin/Bass' films were shown on the Family Channel and Freeform during their December "25 Days of Christmas" seasonal period. Starting in 2018, the specials moved to AMC and aired during their "Best Christmas Ever" seasonal period. The original *Rudolph* and *Frosty* specials currently air on CBS under a separate contract with Rankin/Bass and its successors-in-interest. The two specials also air on Freeform. The look and style of the films heavily influences more modern holiday classics such as *Elf* (2003).

The specials of Rankin/Bass have been parodied by the likes of TV series from *Saturday Night Live*[14] to *South Park*,[15] while non-holiday works like *The Last Unicorn* maintained a cult following.[16]

Filmography

Franchises

Title	Release date
Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer	1964–1979
The Little Drummer Boy	1968–1976
Frosty the Snowman	1969–1979
Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town	1970–1977

Overseas animation studios used by Rankin/Bass

Japanese studios

- MOM Production, Tokyo, Japan
- Toei Animation, Tokyo, Japan
- TCJ (Television Corporation of Japan) (now Eiken), Tokyo, Japan
- Mushi Production, Tokyo, Japan
- Topcraft, Tokyo, Japan

- Pacific Animation Corporation, Tokyo, Japan
- The Anime International Company, Tokyo, Japan
- Anime R, Osaka, Japan
- Atelier BWCA (background studio), Tokyo, Japan
- See Throu Studio (background studio), Tokyo, Japan

Other studios

- Crawley Films, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
- Halas and Batchelor, London and Stroud, England, United Kingdom
- Estudios Moro, Barcelona, Spain
- Cuckoo's Nest Studios (Wang Film Productions), Taipei, Taiwan
- Hanho Heung-Up, Seoul, South Korea

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15. "South Park" A Very Crappy Christmas (TV Episode 2000) - Connections - IMDB (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0705892/movieconnections/?tab=mc&ref_=tt_trv_cnn)
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External links

- Rick Goldschmidt's "The Enchanted World of Rankin/Bass" (http://www.rankinbass.com)
- *Rankin/Bass Animated Entertainment (https://www.bcdb.com/cartoons/Other_Studios/R/Rankin_Bass_Productions/index.html)* at the Big Cartoon DataBase
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